

The Rites of Passage of AmaXhosa Revisited

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AmaXhosa as a people

The term ‘the Xhosa’, and ‘AmaXhosa’ are used interchangeably throughout the article. The term Xhosa refers to the Indigenous Xhosa-speaking people of the Eastern Cape in South Africa. According to Hirst (1), the Xhosa occupied the Eastern Cape as far as 1593 and are of the Nguni group comprised of 3 additional tribes located outside the Eastern Cape such as the Ndebele, the Zulu and the Swati. AmaXhosa use rituals to negotiate a responsible relationship in the human community, with the ancestors, spirits, divinities and cosmos, (2) thus becoming a way of life. As subsets of culture, rituals carry meaning and a definite religious element– a link established between the present moment and original reality. (3)

Rites of passage of the Xhosa

Among the Xhosa speaking people children undergo different rituals through the process of enculturation during the rites of passage from infancy to adulthood as these rituals define them as a people. The rituals discussed include: i) *efukwini* (behind the door – birth rites); ii) *tonjane* (female puberty rites); and iii) *ulwaluko* (traditional male circumcision). Each rite follows one another in a sequence in three phases. This sequence is characterised by “leave and cleave” phenomenon, meaning that a person leaves the old life behind and is “re-incorporated,” into society – which signifies embracing new life, and new ways of doing things.

The three most important rites in the life of the Xhosa within Gen-nep's theory of liminality

Van Gennep (4) identifies three types of rites of passage, which are “separation rites”, “transition rites”, and “incorporation rites”. Each rite signifies people moving over thresholds, (5) Van Gennep (4) and Turner (5) identify three phases to which each rite belongs, i.e., pre-liminal, liminal, and postliminal. In preliminal phase, rites of separation temporarily remove the person from the usual place. It includes change. The liminal phase includes transition, characterised by ambiguity, as Turner puts it, “the person is neither here nor there, they are betwixt and between the positions assigned by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial” (p. 359). The postliminal phase symbolises incorporation of the person back into the community, on a higher status and with support. (4) Below are the three most important rites of passage in the life of the Xhosa.

1. Efukwini (behind the door – birth rites) ritual

i) Separation phase:

Efukwini is a sacred space for giving birth among the Xhosa peoples. It is characterised by the separation phase, where the expectant woman enters a secluded place (hut) to give birth. She remains in separation with the infant while *umdlezane* (a nursing mother) for the first 10 days to protect the child from evil forces. (6) *Umdlezane* is attended by older family women who serve as assistants. The hut becomes a sacred space and no man is allowed to enter that space. (6)

ii) Transition phase:

Within the period of the 10 days the baby undergoes *ukuwisa* (the falling of the baby's umbilical stump) and is given a name. The falling of the stump becomes an important event as it must be buried by *umdlezane* alone within the sacred space of birth for anchoring the child to its roots. This ritual signifies transitioning the foetus from birth to babyhood. When the mother returns with the baby after 10 days, women welcome them back, arrange food and people are now permitted to see the baby, while ensuring that there is fire always burning at the fireplace to maintain warmth for the nursing mother and infant.

iii) Incorporation phase:

When the nursing mother returns with the child to the people after 10 days, a white goat is slaughtered, (1) and the ceremony is called *imbeleko* (carry on your back). The ceremony characterises the incorporation phase. Allegritti and Gray (7) postulate that the purpose of this ritual is to introduce the child to the ancestors (p.3). Because the health of the child is dependent upon protection by ancestors from evil spirits, this ritual brings stability on the health of the child and failure to observe this ritual is believed to bring misfortune. (8)

2. Intonjane (female rites) ritual

i) Separation phase:

Intonjane Is the Xhosa term for a girl's rites of passage to womanhood performed between a girl's first menstruation and her wedding. (6) The ritual involves separation for a period of a week to three weeks, depending on the family wishes and culminates an event associated with girl's developmental stages. The girl is placed in *ejakeni* (a special hut), which is built for this special purpose and has a curtain made with grass mats to create a partition for privacy. New utensils to be used by the initiate are purchased by the parents beforehand. An announcement is made to the village about the entering of their daughter into this ritual. The family looks out for virgin girls that can voluntarily serve as assistants to the initiate during the period spent in separation. These assistants may or may not be related to the family of the initiate.

ii) Transition phase:

The initiate's lifestyle changes, as she transitions into a new space, and is now placed behind the curtain, attended to by the assistants. The slaughtering of a goat takes place on the on first or second day of entering intonjane with the initiate given *isiphika* (the right shoulder of the slaughtered animal) as *umshwamo* (meat roasted on fire) to eat using a stick as she is not allowed to use her hands. She is taught about mannerisms and to conduct herself in a respectful manner. The initiate also learns about how to preserve virginity to avoid pregnancy and other sexually transmitted diseases, as well as her role in looking after her family later in life.

iii) Incorporation phase:

The final phase of the ritual includes incorporation of the initiate into the same community from which she was removed temporarily, during the transitional phase. She is now ready to apply the teachings learned during the separation and transition phases which includes her role in family matters. She comes back as neither a child nor an adolescent, but as an adult, a new person. (4) The incorporation phase is characterised by the initiate being more receptive on teachings than in previous phases. Van Gennep (4) and Turner (5) observed that even though these rituals occur in a linear fashion, acts that happen in one phase do occur again in another phase.

3. Ulwaluko (traditional male circumcision rites) ritual

i) Separation phase:

Ulwaluko Is the traditional male circumcision rites to manhood, in which boys learn about acquiring their identity. (9) Among the Xhosa speaking people, there is a saying that a boy is not a person and that he emerges from this state to become a man, after he had been through *ulwaluko*. (6) (p. 85). This initiation ritual involves great excitement among AmaXhosa and consists of *umngeno* (the entering, which includes separation of the initiate to the bush). He is still a boy until circumcision takes place at the bush. *Umngeno* is characterised by the separation phase, which is the first part of the ritual – the boy is temporarily removed to the bush where he remains for about a month or 6 weeks, depending on the family. Before the separation, a goat is slaughtered for the boy to eat *isiphika* (the right shoulder) excised from the goat and roasted on fire. Festivities as part of his send-off ceremony are observed, and the parents identify an *Ingcibi* (Traditional circumcision surgeon) to perform circumcision.

ii) Transition phase:

The transitional phase is comprised of *ubukhwetha* (being an initiate) which occurs at the bush. The boy has undergone transition from boyhood into an initiate. The initiates are provided with *Amakhankatha* (assistants), who care for their healing and ensure that they are nourished. In this phase the initiate learns about being an adult as the process of becoming a man is not yet fully accomplished. (9) The person is in-between, for he is neither a child nor an adult and learning to

be an appropriate adult is continuous at this stage. The aim is to make the person forget about the previous behaviour and to embrace the acceptable life that lies ahead.

iii) Incorporation phase:

The incorporation phase is characterised by “leave and cleave” phenomenon, i.e., the initiate leaves the old life behind and is “re-incorporated,” into society – which signifies embracing new life, and new ways of doing things. The incorporation phase is characterised by different ceremonies that occur in stages but for only one purpose, i.e., “incorporation “of the new man called *ikrwala*, (graduate) (9) back into the community. The ceremony for the occasion is called *umphumo* (the coming out). The new man is now expected to conduct himself as a responsible adult, attending to social issues that were not part of his life before circumcision. It is at this phase that older men show *amakrwala* (graduates) or new men, how to be ‘real men’ (7) and it is commonly shared that men who have been through initiation are distinguishable by their social behaviour.

Conclusion

There are commonalities drawn from all these rituals. Firstly, the notion of place and space are very important among AmaXhosa when conducting these rituals, as space ensures the sacredness of the ritual. Secondly, AmaXhosa believe that ancestors brood over the homestead, especially around *ixhanti* (the tethering post) –as this is believed to invoke the ancestors. (10) Thirdly, there is the aesthetic aspect demonstrated throughout ritual performance to ensure it is accepted by the ancestors. These rituals are perceived to contribute to health and wellbeing of individuals as all are meant to socially integrate people into society. The rituals are what make them as a people.

References

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